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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA, H(NOTTINGHAM)
NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PREF](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: SFRC Staffer Blank's visit to Sri Lanka

Refs: Colombo 1399, and previous

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Charge'
d'Affaires. Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

SUMMARY

[11.](#) (C) During his recent visit, SFRC staffer Dr. Jonah Blank traveled throughout Sri Lanka, with stops in Colombo, Galle, Jaffna, and Trincomalee. In meetings with Blank, GSL officials expressed general optimism about the peace process. Contacts in the south, however, expressed concern about Tiger activities. Those from the war-torn north/east noted the magnitude of the rehabilitation challenge and underscored the need for ethnic reconciliation. Overall, while everyone admitted that the situation was fragile, there was a strong feeling that Sri Lanka had come a long way from the dark days of the war and must not reverse course.
END SUMMARY.

----- A Wide-ranging Visit -----

[12.](#) (SBU) Dr. Jonah Blank, Senate Foreign Relations Committee senior policy advisor on South Asia (Minority), visited Sri Lanka August 3-10 to obtain an on-the-ground understanding of island-wide views on the peace process. During his comprehensive trip, Dr. Blank and emboffs held meetings in Colombo, and visited Galle in the south, Jaffna in the north, and Trincomalee in the east.

----- Colombo: Optimism re the Peace Process -----

[13.](#) (C) During the Colombo set of meetings, Sri Lankan government officials were generally optimistic about the peace process with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) organization. Key peace process figures in the GSL, such as Ministers G.L. Peiris and Milinda Moragoda, indicated that the government's recent interim administration proposal for the north/east was the first step in getting the LTTE to resume talks. (Note: The LTTE pulled out of the talks in April 2003.) Moragoda added that the interim administration concept was merely a means to an end, not the end itself. Peiris told Blank there was the greatest hope now for progress along the peace track. He tempered his comments, however, by reflecting on what he characterized as the Tigers' "insecurity," given the group's lack of political experience. A little bit less optimistic than the GSL officials, Opposition Leader Mahinda Rajapakse expressed concern over recent Tiger behavior, and hoped for closer peace process consultation between Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and President Kumaratunga.

[14.](#) (C) Interlocutors in Colombo also spoke of the government's need to manage more effectively public expectations regarding the peace process and rehabilitation activities. Norwegian Ambassador Hans Brattskar, representing his country's facilitation effort, stated that negotiating through the difficult issues dividing the GSL and the Tigers would take time. The public needed to understand that it all could not happen with a flick of a switch. Moragoda admitted that redevelopment and economic measures were difficult to manage and hoped that both parties -- the government and the LTTE -- would show tangible gains via an active rehabilitation and reconstruction program. Otherwise, he continued, public frustration over lack of economic and material progress could increase to the detriment of the peace track.

----- Galle: Worries about the LTTE -----

[15.](#) (C) During meetings in the southern, Sinhalese-

majority city of Galle, government officials as well as university interlocutors expressed some concerns about the direction of the peace process. Citing deep distrust of the LTTE, Governor of the Western Province (where Colombo is located) Kingsley Wickramaratne, a nominee of President Kumaratunga, expressed the need for enhanced U.S. and Indian involvement in the peace process to counter a pattern of aggressive LTTE activities. In a meeting with officials of Ruhuna University, professors emphasized the moderating influence the U.S. had played on the LTTE since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Dean of Medicine Susurith Mendis remarked that since the LTTE were now negotiating from a position of strength in that it was already exerting a high degree of influence in the north/east, it would be more difficult to convince the Tigers to return to negotiations. Despite their worries about the LTTE, all interlocutors urged a return to negotiations, while emphasizing the need for closer dialogue between the prime minister and the president.

16. (C) While noting that the north/east had suffered devastating losses in terms of infrastructure, contacts also underscored the need for rehabilitation island-wide. Touching on the popular notion in the south that all assistance was being funneled to the north/east, local officials noted high unemployment rates in the Galle District and a general need for revitalization in the south.

Jaffna: Facing the Rehabilitation Challenge

17. (C) In the one-day visit to Jaffna, the U.S. team observed a bustling downtown marketplace and indications of road repair around the war-torn Peninsula. People seemed most concerned with restoring their daily lives, despite the looming specter of the Tamil Tigers, who were exercising a significant "shadow" influence on the situation in Jaffna.

18. (C) Rehabilitation and reconstruction of the Jaffna area seemed to be the first item on interlocutor's minds. While declining to comment on the peace process (perhaps because he was scared of LTTE reprisals), C. Pathmanathan, the Government Agent (GA) for Jaffna, for example, instead focused optimistically on the presence of the international community's aid projects. NGO representatives and the GA spoke about the need to rebuild housing and restore basic services, but placed a spotlight on the difficulties of the situation. The GA lamented that thousands of Jaffna residents had fled the district in the last two decades, saying that only a minimal community social structure remained today. This factor had decimated the technical capacity of the area's residents. International aid workers concurred that the community lacked the necessary labor and trade skills to help itself, and thus was reliant on outside assistance. NGO contacts also mentioned the practical challenges faced by many Internally Displaced Person (IDP) returnees prevented from regaining lost properties, as their land was within GSL security zones, which covered roughly 20 percent of the land in the district.

19. (C) In a rare opportunity for U.S. officials, the team drove through the LTTE-controlled Vanni region during its drive from Jaffna to the eastern town of Trincomalee. Traveling the north/south "A9" road, there were some signs of development in the Vanni as well. Along the "A9," yellow string edged the roadside where Humanitarian Demining Unit (HDU) deminers had begun clearing land. (Note: HDU is the demining arm of the pro-LTTE Tamil Rehabilitation Organization.) In places less jeopardized by landmines, repaving of the A9 road was underway. In the LTTE administrative center of Kilinochchi, a brand new building stood next to placards for 'proposed' school and hospital building sites. The team also spotted several LTTE cadre, including one apparently from the infamous Black Tiger suicide squad, strolling in Kilinochchi along with white-uniformed school children and local residents going about their morning business.

Trincomalee: A Mix of Views

10. (C) In Trincomalee, the dividends of peace were readily apparent. During the U.S. team's one-day stay, the two large local hotels were fully booked as visiting Sri Lankans and foreigners took advantage of Trincomalee's beaches. The town itself also seemed to be booming, with many new stores opened up and new building sites scattered around. Not all was fun and

sun along Trincomalee's marketplace and fish stalls, however, as the delegation observed radical Janantha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) posters criticizing the government's peace process efforts.

11. (C) A meeting at the local Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) office revealed the extent of reconciliation challenges that lay ahead in the ethnically-mixed Trincomalee area: in addition to mediating between the LTTE and GSL, fishermen and other groups also approached the SLMM to report problems they were having with both sides. There were many tensions between the Tamil and Muslim communities over land and LTTE harassment. Re the LTTE-GSL military relationship, however, the SLMM stated that confrontations seemed to be decreasing over time and many local military officials were intent on strengthening communication lines -- via the SLMM -- with the Tigers. While NGO interlocutors highlighted their community rebuilding activities, they noted that redevelopment progress occurred in the shadow of a strong -- and sometimes threatening -- LTTE presence. (Note: In Trincomalee, the team also discussed the issue of the LTTE's continuing refusal to vacate a camp in the district in spite of the SLMM's repeated requests -- see Reftels.)

COMMENT

12. (C) Dr. Blank's visit was wide-ranging in its scope and provided an excellent snapshot of the situation in Sri Lanka roughly 18 months after the advent of the peace process. Despite the many distinct strands in the current situation, there was an overall feeling that Sri Lanka had come a long way from the dark days of the war and must not reverse course. Given the pattern of aggressive LTTE activities, however, contacts expressed no certainty whether the current situation was permanent, or whether it was merely an interregnum in a longer war. END COMMENT.

13. (U) Dr. Blank departed Colombo before he could clear this cable.

14. (U) Minimize considered.

ENTWISTLE